

# *BOMB*

## John Sims by A.M. Weaver

*Math artist John Sims kicks off his exhibition series at the Bowery Poetry Club tonight. Writer / curator A.M. Weaver spoke with him.*



The Portraits of a MathArtist

John Sims is a conceptual artist who is creating a catalogue of projects spanning the mathematical art to the socio-political. In the fall of 2008, he completed *Square Roots: A Quilted Manifesto* for exhibition at the Wilmer Jennings Gallery, Kenkeleba House in New York. This project presented a collection of 13 quilts done in collaboration with Amish quilters that focused on the visual manifestation of Pi and the Pythagorean mathematics.

The project also included his video installation by his alter ego Johannes Curtis Schwarzenstein, an AfroGermanJewish MathArtPoet and the music blues composition based on Pi. His political project *Recoloration Proclamation* started with re-coloring the Confederate flag to shift the paradigms surrounding its meaning as an emblem of white supremacy, leading to the controversial piece, “The Proper Way to Hang a Confederate Flag”, the various remixing of Dixie, and to the recoloring of other flags from other countries. This interview gives insight into Sims’ thoughts on his work and direction.

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A. M. Weaver Where were you born and what about your upbringing steered you toward the arts?

John Sims I was born in Detroit, MI. I grew up in Detroit city proper, where there is a strong blue-collar working class aesthetic. This pushed me to appreciate theory and abstraction. I like to study how things work and apply that to other things. However, I was always interested in both theory and practice as a unit. I went to a college prep high school in the day and vo-tech school at night. These dual interests led me to Antioch College and their co-op program. The idea of a theory/practice dialectic was natural.

**AMW**

In 1997, you started to expand from mathematics into mathematical art. What precipitated that shift?

**JS**

As a graduate student I began making things, namely clocks. Then I attended a math and art conference in 1997 at SUNY Albany-organized by Nat Friedman—where I met other math folks interested in art. That led me to critically think about the connection of mathematics and art, what would constitute mathematical art, and how that could relate to visual mathematics.

**AMW**

Who are a few artists whose work had a great impact on your development?

**JS**

Well, Sol LeWitt, of course. I like M.C. Escher for his unapologetic use of mathematical ideas; Duchamp for his intellectually subversive work; Warhol for glamorizing the mundane; and Karen Finely for provoking the political. I like the political commitment and intensity and politics of both Dread Scott and DJ Spooky’s work—both who I have worked with. My flag work is definitely informed by Dread’s work; Spooky and I have some work around pi and remixing Dixie. However, it was in graduate school where I met a special artist, Bob White. His work is awesome. He was the audio-video tech coordinator, and he

had access to all sorts of electronic artifacts from which he made sculptures. His creative imagination is quite unique.

### **AMW**

Your work exists within a post-conceptual framework, given its reliance on the object to make an impact. However, your agenda to construct a visual language for abstract mathematical concepts and political ideas puts the work in line with traditional conceptual precepts. How do you think your work furthers discussions of conceptual art in the 21st century?

### **JS**

Well, mathematical art as conceptual art seems to be too focused; it's maybe too narrow in some ways and too general in other ways. While the work of M.C. Escher is mathematical and representational, Sol LeWitt's is conceptual and minimal. I seek to build upon the work of these artists toward a neo-Pythagorean metaphysics, which puts mathematics at the center of some sort conceptual realism. Neo-Pythagorean would be a reactivation of the ideas behind the Pythagoreans, who put mathematics at the center of art, music, science, and spirituality. They also introduced the importance of proofs.





The Proper Way to Hang a Confederate Flag 2006

**AMW**

What do you mean by conceptual realism?

**JS**

It would be the mechanism of mapping elements of a conceptual (mathematical) space to inform a physical reality, which inspires a language and aesthetic that informs and expands the conceptual space. For instance, a square is a mathematical idea that structures our immediate visual landscape, from grids and buildings to wallpaper. Now the square is as real as an apple.

**AMW**

Can you talk a little about your early associations with Sol LeWitt?

**JS**

Well, Sol LeWitt is one my favorite artists. His work celebrated and promoted ideas as art, and was very stimulating and layered in terms of framing a mathematical process. I sought him out for an exhibition I was curating for Ringling College of Art and Design; he was very warm and receptive. Later we worked together on other projects including a show I did in Harlem called *MathArt in Harlem*.

**AMW**

*JohnSimsProjects* is the sum total of works you have created to date and you have incorporated a record of them on your website. Can you explain the structure and aim of *JohnSimsProjects* as a system?

**JS**

Well, I have thought a lot about process and the distributions of ideas into the market and media stream. I tend to naturally gravitate to forms of projects thanks to my geeky science fair days, as a way to package and explore ideas in a systematic way. Anyway, *JohnSimsProjects* is a collection of three projects that deal with mathematical art, political art, and time-based public sculpture. Each project has its own structure and includes sub-projects. This allows me to centralize themes while exploring many mediums. Also, in each project, I explore text, image/objects, and sounds. For instance, for the mathematical art, the quilts are presented as objects, the "Blue Pi" music as sound, and the

Johannes Curtis Schwarzenstein poetry piece as text. I am constantly thinking about how these projects co- and counter-exist.

## **AMW**

How do you begin a project?

## **JS**

It can happen in two ways. I usually start with an object, which motivates an idea. That idea connects to other objects and so on, and, at some point, there is a convergence where idea meets form. Or sometimes I am fascinated by an object. Then I will seek to abstract the object into different spatial dimensions.





## AMW

What prompted you to do the *Quilt* series? I know you were inspired by your collection of fabric from Africa, but how did you conceive of folding in your concerns with math and quilting?

## JS

I wanted to make a quilt with fabric I got from Ghana, and then I became interested in visualizing irrational numbers. I approached a quilt shop in Sarasota about helping me to make a quilt. The shop owner, a savvy woman who collects art and likes science and mathematics, and I connected in a very magical way. She saw how I was trying to use quilting as a metaphor to connect mathematical thinking and art. This was perfect and doing the project with the quilt shop was more than perfect.

## AMW

Do you see yourself continuing the quilt project? Please discuss the *Seeing Pi* quilt, why you used the multi-colored scheme for the quilt, and how you arrived at 36 × 36 two-inch squares?

## JS

The 13 quilts came together to articulate my math art manifesto. The *Seeing Pi* quilt is a conceptualization of Pi expressed in base ten primary, secondary, and tertiary colors and tones of red that correspond to the numbers 0-9. Each color is assigned a number and is placed on the quilt starting in the middle and spiraling out in a square format. Pi is the circumference divided by the diameter of a circle and is an irrational number that never repeats itself. So, mapped into 10 colors, I begin in the center and spiraling out I write the digits of pi, then I assign colors to numbers: all of the 4's are brown, for instance.

## AMW

Ideas and experiences during your trips abroad seemed to trigger directions for your projects. Time spent in Ghana in 1995 helped to shape the quilt project and a trip to Israel in 1998 fueled your *Recoloration Reclamation* series. Explain the *aha* moments that prompted you to make the work that you did after the trips.

## JS

Well, there is no orgasmic *aha* moment, but rather a plowing through a field of ideas in search of something that makes sense. My travels, as my conversations, have planted many seeds that more often than not lead to something stimulating. But I listen to myself



and extend ideas by stitching them into something I hope will be challenging, inspiring, and, most important, meaningful.



Recolored Flags: DragFlag, McChina, USIraqi, Israeli- Palestinian, AfroConfederate. 2006

**AMW**

How did your experience in Israel lead you to create the re-coloration of the Israeli-Palestinian flag?

**JS**

It was very intense. People had guns on the bus. I liked moving through these historical spaces. However, the political and social tensions were three dimensional, meaning real as an apple on a tree.

**AMW**

Does your combined flag speak to the interconnection and interdependency between the two nations?

**JS**

The Palestinian-Israeli Flag was an extension of the Afro-Confederate Flag. I am pro-peace: Palestinian independence and security for all.

**AWM**

The Confederate flag constitutes the main focus of the *Recoloration Proclamation* project. The use of cotton references slavery and the cotton production industry is indicative of a Southern past. Elaborate on the impact that this charged image, the Confederate flag, has for you.

**JS**

This flag means many things to many people. For me originally it means something rather sensitive related to supremacy. And like most competitive people, I resist political and social declaration of supremacy. Because I have worked with it as an object of art, it now lacks the emotional tension it once had for me. After working with it over and over the emotional tension was lessened. I am free, so to speak.

**AMW**

Where do you see the *Recoloration* project going?

**JS**

The *Recoloration Proclamation* project allows me to engage art and politics with community activism. It allows me to respond to political and social issues that are real, emotional, and historical.

Right now, for instance, I am working on a play and flag burial. At some point the play will be dramatized. It chronicles the making of the *Recoloration Proclamation* project, centering on my preparing for the Gettysburg exhibition and the making of the gallows piece. I want to conclude the project with a multi-state burial of the flag. I have issued a call to artists, poets, and community organizers to help make this happen.



TimeSculpture Installation, 2001

### **AMW**

Although you have expanded into the areas of sculpture and music, you seem to continuously revisit the use of fabric to articulate your ideas. Why is that? Why are you selecting the emblems of quilts—decorative works to keep you warm-and flags-the earliest form of cultural branding—to make artistic statements that are personal and, in some instances, political? Is it because these forms are cultural artifacts that are familiar?

### **JS**

Well, I started in sculpture with metal work. I think fiber art is sculptural, two-dimensional soft sculpture, like skin on a body. And in terms of the history of cotton and its relationship to slavery and commerce in this country and the connection to the Civil War, the politics of the fabric, at all levels, is a part of the foundation of America. I am essentially looking at space—personal space, national space, universal space. Objects like quilts, flags, and clocks speak to that.

**AMW**

Where do you see conceptualism going and what trends do you perceive on the horizon?

**JS**

Well, I see conceptual work becoming more integrated with the other areas of art and science/mathematics and becoming more physical, object-orientated, and technology-based and more social driven. We see it with a notion of conceptual craft. The quilts are about using craft and visual mathematics to construct a manifesto, which is basically a statement on the unification of art—one discipline merges into another, theory and the conceptual coexist with production. Some of this thinking has informed my direction including my current project I am doing at the Bowery Club poetry called *Rhythm of Structure: Mathematics, Art and Poetic Reflection*. It goes from September 11, 2009, to August 30, 2010. It is a series of nine exhibitions (duets and group shows) organized to weave the ideas and process of mathematics, art, and poetry. The art is presented to engage various mathematical ideas while speaking to the work it is present with. Poets are then invited to respond, reflection and translate creating a visual call and poetic response. Some of the shows will include the pairing of Sol LeWitt/Adrian Piper, Dread Scott/Paul D. Miller and Karen Finley and myself. And in the group shows we will have range of projects: some with leading mathartists, New York area art students and quilters from all over the country.

*A. M. Weaver is an independent curator and writer, living in Philadelphia.*